

University of Massachusetts Amherst ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst

Emeritus Faculty Author Gallery

2010

11. Revising by Reading Aloud. What the Mouth and Ear Know

Peter Elbow

University of Massachusetts - Amherst, elbow@english.umass.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umass.edu/emeritus_sw

 Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), [English Language and Literature Commons](#), [Linguistics Commons](#), and the [Rhetoric and Composition Commons](#)

Elbow, Peter, "11. Revising by Reading Aloud. What the Mouth and Ear Know" (2010). *Emeritus Faculty Author Gallery*. 29.
Retrieved from https://scholarworks.umass.edu/emeritus_sw/29

This is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in Emeritus Faculty Author Gallery by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact scholarworks@library.umass.edu.

DRAFT

January 2010

PART THREE

Reading Aloud: A Role for the Tongue During the Late Stages of Writing--Treating Writing as Speech

Introduction

In Part Two, ("Easy Speaking onto the Page") I focused on the early stages of writing and here in Part Three I focus on the late stage of revising. The theme for Part Two was *treating speaking as writing*; the theme here is *treating writing as speaking*.

In Part Two, I worked hard to justify an idea that might have sounded wrong to many people: that we can speak careless "illiterate" language onto the page even when our goal is to produce "correct" writing that is different from speech. Here in Part Three, I have an easier sell: reading aloud to revise is an old and venerable practice. Writers and teachers have advocated it down through the ages. But interesting issues will arise as I explore this simple, mother-and-apple-pie way of using the tongue for revising.

One Last Job of Defining: What is "Standard English"?

I need to explore two terms that are particularly slippery, arguable, or even dubious: "standard written English" and "standard spoken English."

It would be nice to think of "standard" as merely neutral--like the platinum rod locked away in a Paris safe that is the "*true standard*" for what we call a meter. It's merely arbitrary, right? There's nothing *superior* or *inherently correct* about how long it is. But feelings of inherent correctness often creep into whatever seems "merely conventional." In fact, the perfect "true meter" locked up in Paris is alleged to be *exactly* one/ten-millionth of the distance from the equator to the north pole along a meridian running through (of course) Paris. So any other length for measurement would surely be irrational or vulgar. In the U.S. and England, we don't go in for French hyper-rationality and we use a more arbitrary measure, namely "feet." But even here there are wisps of "correctness": twelve inches is said to be the length of Charlemagne's foot. That's probably a myth, but we'll run into Charlemagne again for a well-documented act of language standardization that had enormous consequences (see pp X).

Most linguists agree that all versions of English are equally rich and complex (as long as they've gone through the threshing floor of the language-creating brains of children--that is, as long as they are not incomplete pidgins). So I'm tempted to go along with a custom among many sophisticated scholars and completely avoid the word "standard." The word itself does harm by smuggling into the conversation the unstated implication of "*good*"--the unargued belief that other varieties of English are inferior or bad or lacking (in a word, "vulgar"). So I will often use the term "*standardized English*."

But I don't want to run away from the term "standard." In order to make some arguments that are central to this book, I have to understand how our culture uses and thinks about speech and writing. I need some open-eyed, anthropological, critical distance for describing the enormous power that is exerted in our culture by the terms "standard written English" and

“standard spoken English.” They have been crowned linguistic royalty. They have enormous ritual power to make many people seek to master them and look down on those who don’t. (In Chapter 17, I’ll give some surprising history of how we got our Standard English in late middle ages. The history is not the conventional one about how London won the competition to be the site for the British Isle language games.)

So the notion of *standard* (or *standardized*) *written English* (SWE) is alive and well in our culture, but what does it consist of? Many varieties of English end up in print in various contexts, but “standard” doesn’t refer to all of them--not even to everything published in mainstream books and magazines. It refers only to one slice of mainstream writing--but an incredibly important and powerful slice: what people call “correct edited written English.” When people champion Standard Written English, they sometimes call it “proper” or “correct” or “literate” writing. Some linguists label it the “grapholect.” To describe it more fully, I’ll call on the linguists, Walt Wolfram, Carolyn Adger and Donna Christian:

[It] tends to be based on the written language of established writers and is typically codified in English grammar texts. It is perpetuated to a large extent in formal institutions such as schools, by those responsible for English language education. (10)

These linguists don’t actually call it “written” English; they call it “*Formal Standard English*” or “*Prescriptive Standard English*.” But they acknowledge that it’s essentially written by saying “There are virtually no speakers who consistently speak formal standard English as prescribed in the grammar books” (10). So it’s a language that is found only on paper--and only in the texts of certain “established writers” and defined in grammar books. Again: standardized written English (or prescriptive standard English) is *no one’s* mother tongue.

And what about standard or standardized *spoken* English? People commonly talk about it, but it’s much harder to nail down. It’s certainly not the English of the grammar books since virtually no one speaks that language. But why call it “standard” if it doesn’t conform to grammar book rules? The justification is largely negative, for this brand of spoken English cannot really be defined positively:

If native speakers from Michigan, New England, and Arkansas avoid the use of socially stigmatized grammatical structures such as “double negatives” (e.g., *They didn’t do nothing*), different verb agreement patterns (e.g., *They’s okay*), and different irregular verb forms (e.g. *She done it*), there is a good chance they will be considered standard English speakers In this way, informal standard English is defined negatively. In other words if a person’s speech is free of structures that can be identified as nonstandard, then it is considered standard. (Wolfram, Adger and Christian 12)

They point out that this assumptions is different from that in various other cultures such in England;

The basic contrast in North America exists between negatively valued dialects and those without negative value, not between those with prestige value and those without. . . . North Americans in commenting on different dialects of American English, are much more likely to make comments about nonstandardness (“That person doesn’t talk correct English”) than they are to comment on standardness (e.g., “That person really speaks correct English”). (12)

It's as though mainstream speakers walk around saying, "I don't know much about standard spoken English, but I know it when I don't hear it." The standard is a wide *range* or *plurality* of different Englishes. There's a lesson here for writing.

In my campaign for choice and personal power in writing, I'll be trying to show how we can write with whatever variety of English comes most easily and naturally to our mouths and minds (which will almost invariably *not* be the standard variety). Even when we have to end up with a document in "standardized written English," we can start out with linguistic comfort and put off till later the necessary adjustments--and those adjustments will be less extensive than we might expect. We don't need to start out by getting ourselves into a "standard English mentality"--or try to be native speakers of "correct writing." Our final correct writing will be clearer and more lively if we use the mentality of our vernacular speech and then make the few adjustments that are necessary.

Is the Tongue Always Informal and Sloppy?

For many reasons this book looks as though it is a flat out celebration of informal language: I've been arguing for speaking onto the page; this means using unplanned informal language; and I make no secret of my scorn for how "literate writing" tries to exclude speech or anything "common." *Vulgar* is the key word in my title--which goes on to say I want to enlist *speech* for writing. In addition, I use a pretty informal style for my own writing here.

But my position is not that simple. Part Three will make it clear that I'm not saying "informal means good and formal means bad." Up to this point, I've tried to show that good writing needs the untutored tongue for the virtues in unplanned speech. But in this Part Three, I think I can show something surprising and interesting: the untutored tongue is good for giving us *well-shaped* and sometimes even *formal* language. We get this by reading aloud for late revising. Reading aloud is far different from unplanned speaking, yet it's also a use of the untutored tongue.

I need to emphasize the word *late* in my phrase, "late revising." This reading aloud process for revising doesn't make so much sense until *after* we've done lots of substantive revising. And I pretty much neglect that kind of deliberate, calculative revising--except for my description of the collage and skeleton process in the previous chapter (10). For late stage revising that I turn to now, some people even use the word *editing* rather than revising. Revising by reading aloud is more about clarity of wording than working out the thinking--though using the tongue to get the words right will tend to sharpen our thinking.

A note to careful writers. There will be some of you who find you cannot write by speaking onto the page as I suggest in Part Two. Because of your habits or temperament, you cannot stand the chaos and wrong writing that result. But the technique I suggest here in Part Three is very different and will be useful and probably comfortable to you. No matter how slowly and carefully you draft, it's almost certain that your almost-final drafts will benefit from revising by slow and careful reading aloud as I describe it below.

=====

Chapter 11

Revising by Reading Aloud: What the Mouth and Ear Know

Samuel Butler is one in a long line of writers through the ages who have celebrated reading aloud for writers:

If Moliere ever did read to [his house maid], it was because the mere act of reading aloud put his work before him in a new light and, by constraining his attention to every line, made him judge it more rigorously. . . . I feel weak places at once when I read aloud where I thought, as long as I read to myself only, that the passage was all right. (25)

Joe Williams and Richard Lanham are recent theorists of style who insist on the benefit of reading aloud.

Consider the long tradition at Oxford and Cambridge for virtually all undergraduate writing to be read aloud to a tutor who (in my day at least) never saw the writing. Individual tutorials have gotten too expensive for most Oxford and Cambridge colleges, but even in group tutorials, students still read their essays aloud. Because of the power and prestige of Oxford and Cambridge through the centuries (graduates got two votes in national elections until 1935), a large portion of prominent politicians, scholars, and leaders of society up till recent times had undergone three years of this weekly ritual: writing essays that they had to read aloud and that were evaluated entirely on the basis of sound. I think this may have something to do with something I've noticed till recently in English scholarly and political writing: it seems more accessible, spoken, and free of jargon than the same genres in German and US academic writing. Even the most scholarly of English academic books have, at least until recently, tended to avoid what we often think of as "normal" academic tangledness.

Mina Shaughnessy, David Bartholomae, Flower and Hayes, and Muriel Harris all discuss the importance of reading aloud specifically for revision (*Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing*, "The Study of Error," "Detection, Diagnosis, and the Strategies of Revision," and "Teaching One-to-One: The Writing Conference.") Eric Havelock stresses the importance of reading aloud in his "Star Wars" (141). See Sally Gibson for her "Reading Aloud: A Useful Tool for Learning?"

Here are some composition textbooks that recommend reading aloud as a technique that improves revision: Kenneth Bruffee's 2007 *A Short Course in Writing: Composition, Collaborative Learning and Constructive Reading*, 4th ed.; Linda Flower's 1998 *Problem-Solving strategies for Writing in College and Community*; Diana Hacker's 2007 *A Writer's Reference*, 6th ed.; Richard Lanham's 2006 *The Longman Guide to Revising Prose*; Donald Murray's 2004 *The Craft of Revision*, 5th ed.; Judith Nadell, John Langan, Eliza A. Comodromos 2006 *The Longman Writer: Rhetoric, Reader, Handbook*, 6th ed.; Joy M. Reid's 2000, *The Process of Composition*, 3rd ed.; Lynn Quitman Troyka w/ Douglas Hesse's 2005 *Simon and Schuster's Handbook for Writers*, 7th ed.; Joseph Williams' 2005 *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*, 8th ed. Thanks to Debbie Rowe for these citations.

Down through the ages, one of the most venerable exercises for learning to write has been to imitate the style of a respected writer--and this exercise often begins with reading aloud passages from the model author.

Reading aloud shows us most when we read to a listener. Their actual presence somehow sucks us into hearing almost through their ears. Still, reading aloud by ourselves is remarkably powerful for late revising. It's also possible also to hear a lot by reading it "aloud inside our heads"--not making a sound but moving our lips--and I sometimes settle for this. But I get better results if I can force myself to say the words outloud.

This chapter and the next one are built around a simple question: how does reading aloud improve prose? A satisfactory answer turns out to be complex and interesting, but I'll begin with the simple claim that I use with first year students: Readers will find your writing clearer and more inviting when your language is comfortable to speak aloud. When it is, readers don't have to work as hard to understand your words. They seem to *hear* the meaning come up off the page. (See this point also in Chapter 5 on intonation.)

I find that when students have the repeated experience of reading their writing aloud, they are more likely to write sentences that are inviting and comfortable to recite--which in turn makes the sentences better for readers who get them in silence. Putting this differently, the *sound* of written words when spoken is a crucial benefit for silent readers, yet too few students *hear* the words they write. When they have to read their writing aloud frequently and thus hear it, they tend to listen more as they write--and readers hear more meaning as they read.

In my teaching, therefore, I build in as many occasions as I can for reading aloud--using all stages of the writing process. Most of these occasions involve no feedback. Thus the reading aloud takes very little class time:

- When I get the whole class to do public freewriting or inkshedding (not private writing), I almost always have us all read our words aloud in pairs or small groups.
- When students are working on essays, I have them read very early drafts to each other in pairs and small groups--not for feedback on the ideas but simply so they can discuss the ideas.
- I have them read their middle drafts in pairs or groups for feedback.
- Even when I ask students to give paper copies of their drafts to each other for written feedback at home, I always ask them to prepare the ground by reading their drafts aloud to their responders in class before taking the paper copies home.
- When students have finished final drafts, I often ask them to read the whole thing in pairs--again, not for feedback but simply to celebrate being done. (Even at this final stage, students often hear problems in what they wrote, but with all the revising they've done it's fun to say, "We can't revise for ever. Let's just call it done for now.")
- I sometimes ask everyone to give a celebratory reading of at least a paragraph or two to the whole class.
- Furthermore, it's become a staple in my teaching of first year writing to have frequent fifteen minute conferences with students during which they read aloud whatever version of the current essay they have in hand. When they stumble over a tangle--or even just mumble--I say, "Read it slowly, read it lovingly, pay attention to how it feels." Then I can say, "Try out some different ways of saying this till you find a version that feels good in your mouth and sounds right in your ear."

Many people have had painful experiences reading aloud in elementary school when they were criticized for every mistake. So now they need supportive conditions for all this reading aloud. And when I'm present (as when they read to the whole class), I don't settle for mumbling and sometimes resort to badgering--supportively.

I sometimes use micro exercises that I learned from John Schultz, in what he has called "Story Workshop." For example, read aloud just a couple of lines from a piece of good published writing one syllable at a time in glacial slowness; or make your voice go way up and way down on

every other word; or read alternate syllables very loud and very soft. These are exercises in artificiality--pushups that help us get over embarrassment--exercises in making a fool of ourselves when someone holds a gun to our heads. The goal is to *hear* and almost revel in the sound of our own voice and not run away. The moral is radical: you can't write well unless you are willing to make a fool of yourself--especially if you want your writing to do more than merely soothe readers into staying comfortable in they already think. These odd exercises improve student reading fast.

In the end, the easiest way to ask people to read aloud well is to ask them to read the words so that a listener without the text will understand them perfectly. This formulation gets away from distracting issues like "acting skill" or "sincerity" or "good expression." It's all about the blunt reality of *felt meaning*. You have to put your effort into *feeling* the meaning--so as to make your voice do what's needed for the listeners to *hear* the meaning without the help of their eyes.

The Process Itself

My claim is clearest when I state it boldly: if students read aloud each sentence they've written and keep revising or fiddling with it till it feels right in the mouth and sounds right in the ear, the resulting sentence will be clear and strong. Here's a more careful translation: the resulting sentence will be *much* clearer and stronger than if the writers relied only on their *understanding* of what sentences should look like, that is, if they relied on what they know of rules or principles.

Of course "clear and strong" is not the same as "correct" by the standards of EWE. "Aint nobody don't use double negatives." This is a strong and clear sentence--and true. Plenty of students hear no problem with "she know." There's still a need for final of copy editing for surface features like spelling and grammar and perhaps register--and this requires calling on knowledge that the mouth and ear don't have. But the goal of revising by mouth and ear is not "correct grammar," it's clarity and strength. The process is about meaning, not propriety.

I find that many students and adults have a hard time *overriding* their sense of rules and principles. Yet often they don't understand the principles they keep trying to use--and in truth, these rules and principles need to be taken with a grain of salt. I find I need to use mini workshops to help them learn the discipline of calling on their tongues and ears. Many students are not used to relying on these organs for writing, and indeed many have been warned to *distrust* them. But when I investigate those students who seem like "naturally skilled writers," I usually discover that they have always instinctively tested everything they wrote against mouth and ear.

We work on sample sentences and longer passages that need revising. I like to start out with examples from published writing to show students that they can vastly improve the work of professionals. Here's one sample:

The newness of bilingual education means that the aim of research is more likely to be an account of what occurs when bilingual education is introduced than a demonstration of outcomes.

I start by getting students to read it aloud in pairs--without changes--for practice in reading aloud and to get a physical feel for the language. Most of them hear pretty quickly that the sentence kind of bogs down and loses focus and clarity of meaning. Of course a good performance can make a bad sentence better--and I like to reward good readings; we all need

practice in putting our bodies into written language. But even when we hear a really good reading that tries to give life to the sentence, I find most students can still feel a kind of mashed potatoes quality after “the aim of research.” So then I ask students to continue in pairs and craft new versions--trying to use *only* the mouth and ear as tools. Here’s a nice revision that came from this process:

Bilingual education is new. As a result, research on it is more likely to show what happens when it’s introduced. Research on long term effects will be harder to get.

This kind of revising takes practice. I use a number of these mini-workshops over the weeks. I sometimes use examples from my own writing. I want students to understand that sad prose is something we all naturally produce. Here’s an example. It came when I was speaking onto the page and trying to get down as much of my thinking as I could, so I let the language run on and on:

When I set up my classes so that students have to read some of their words aloud--read their drafts, read their revisions, read short exploratory pieces--read something at least once a week in pairs or small groups or even in ten or fifteen minute conferences with me--I think I see them more often writing words in which readers hear meaning--words that do a better job of silently giving meaning to readers.

Once people read it aloud they can feel the repetition and loss of energy because I kept piling on caboose phrases that make the sentence go on and on. (It’s a good example of how right-branching syntax naturally runs wild in speech. Right-branching is a good *kind* of syntax for writing, but we don’t want everything it gives us.) Using mouth and ear we revised it to this:

I set up my first year writing classes so that students have to read some of their writing aloud every week. They read a draft, a revision, an exploratory exercise; they read in pairs, in small groups, or they read to me in mini-conferences of ten or fifteen minutes.

I also like to illustrate the awkwardness that comes not from speaking onto the page but from revising. Revising often leads us to *construct* sentences that have lost all connection to the mouth: we piece sentences together word by word--as we try to wrestle them into the meaning we are trying to work out. Here’s an example I have to own as mine:

I need to emphasize the point from our collaborative paper about avoiding translation for getting from first language to second language--and instead using revision.

Embarrassing, but many people end up with this kind of thing after a first revision. Yet when we submit it to mouth and ear, big improvements emerge:

I need to emphasize this point from our collaborative paper: that when people write something in their first language and want to get it into a second language, they should avoid *translating*. They need to put the first version out of sight, and write a new version that functions as revision, not translation.

Searching for what is *sayable* led naturally to active verbs (“we should *avoid* translation” and “*use* revision”). It naturally avoided that limp prepositional-phrase-with-gerund (“*about avoiding*”). But there was no need to think about grammar or stylistic theory. Just insist that the tongue find a way of *saying* the thought.

I sometimes give them longer examples. Here’s a piece of published writing whose author seems to have lost the use of his organs for speech and hearing. (This is longer and worse than I normally use for in class exercises with students. You’ll see in a few pages why I include it here.)

My own research shows that in a model simultaneously accounting for both House and presidential on-year voting in terms of voters' issue preferences, partisanship, economic evaluations, assessments of the presidential candidates' personal qualities, and demographic characteristics, the electoral value of being an incumbent rather than an open-seat candidate fell to 16 percent, on average, from 1980-88 to 1992-2000. An analogous model of midterm voting, necessarily absent the presidential voting equation and the presidential candidate variables, reveals comparable decline in the power of incumbency from 1978-86 to 1990-98. (Born, 12 Written by a professor for more general readers--i.e., in a college alumni magazine.)

It's hard work to improve this. Here's my attempt:

In national elections, incumbents generally fare better than candidates competing for an open seat. But this advantage can decline. My research shows how it declined by 16 percent over about twenty years (from 1980-88 to 1992-2000). I saw a similar decline when I looked at twenty years of mid term elections (from 1978-86 to 1990-98, when the presidency is not on the ballot). For this research, I used a model that accounted for both House and presidential on-year voting, and I looked at the following factors: partisanship, economic evaluations, demographic features, the issues voters preferred, and assessments of the presidential candidates' personal qualities.

After lots of this kind of practice, I can point students to any tangled sentences and passages in their drafts and say "I'm having to struggle to read this. It feels clogged. Remember our workshops? Make it right for your mouth and ear. Make it speakable."

Paradoxically, it is possible to revise by reading aloud while in the act of generating words for the first time. As I mentioned in the chapter on *care*, some good writers use great deliberation to get the first draft to be virtually the last draft. When one of these skilled people also tests every word with mouth and ear, we are likely to say, "She writes sentences slowly and carefully, but she always builds highly speakable, natural sounding, comfortable, clear sentences." They don't use blurting, they used slow planned speaking.

Revising Longer Passages and Whole Essays with the Mouth and Ear

The mouth and ear tell us not only about individual sentences but also about longer passages. We might have worked on two individual sentences and made each one strong and clear, but when we read them one after another we hear something wrong at the joint. Perhaps there's a slight contradiction, or they need a transition, or they need to be in a different sequence. Or perhaps each one has a lovely rhythm, but the two rhythms work against each other--as when two sentences cry out to be parallel but we didn't notice the possibility because we worked so hard on each one individually. (As I mentioned in Chapter 4, Halliday-based grammar stresses that adjacent sentences should normally use a *given/new* structure: we should always start the second sentence with information given by the first one--and only then provide the *new* information. But with reading aloud, we don't have to do this kind of conscious analysis: the ear tends to *hear* when the new information is hard to digest for lack of the given information--if this really is a problem. For it's not hard to find exceptions to the given/new rule in good writing. But they won't be exceptions to the mouth-and-ear rule.)

Reading aloud helps us hear problems in the larger organizational structures too. When we are revising, we do lots of stopping and starting; we often lose perspective on the whole as we

follow the twists and turns of the micro organization and lose sight of the macro organization. We can't see the forest for the trees. Even though logic seems much more a matter of mind than body, nevertheless we can often *hear* a lapse in logic. That is, we can hear when the train leaves the tracks, whether they are organizational tracks or logical tracks.

Reading aloud can even help us feel a loss of energy or focus or presence. The mouth and ear can lead us to say, "Okay, everything's pretty strong and clear here, but you're taking too long. Spit it out, get to the point quicker. You're tiring me."

* * *

In the last section of this chapter, I'll give more examples of problems that reading aloud can help us with. And I'll also compare what we learn from the mouth and ear with advice from respected authorities on style. But first, consider this interesting question.

How Does Reading Aloud Relate to Ordinary Speaking?

No listener would ever mistake reading aloud with ordinary conversational speaking. So too, when we revise our writing by reading it aloud we seldom come up with everyday speech. The process makes our written sentences *sayable*, but they are seldom sentences we *say*. Everyday speech is usually informal and often disjointed, but the practice of revising by reading aloud steers our writing away from what's chaotic to what's well formed (even if the well-formed uses slang or an informal register). Thus if we take a transcript of our everyday speech and read it aloud, it will seldom feel right to the mouth or sound right to the ear--even though all the language came from the mouth. Here's a piece of actual speech from a smart linguist speaking off the cuff in a seminar about the function of repetition in spoken language:

Yeah. I think that the function is open and, to talk about general function, I think the function in general is to direct, so that--a pointing function--to direct a hearer back to something and say, "Pay attention to this again. This is still salient; this is still--has potential meaning or some kind of potential that can be exploited by us and let's make use of it in some way." (Johnstone 67)

This is worthy of the Nixon tapes. The tongue produced it, but it's not acceptable to the tongue. (This is an intriguing fact about human speaking that I wish linguists would explore.)

"Formality" is built of *form*--and the tongue and ear like form. Revising by mouth and ear often give us language a bit more elevated than everyday speech--sometimes even slightly artificial. Consider this sentence from *Peter Pan*:

There came also children's voices, for so safe did the boys feel in their hiding place that they were gaily chatting. (80, James Barrie. Quoted p 124 of Green in Tannen 1982.)

Who knows how James Barrie produced that literary or artificial sentence, but I doubt that he would have spoken it in conversation. Yet it pleased his tongue and ear and it surely pleases most readers. We might say that revising by reading aloud gives us not *spoken* language but language that's inviting to speak.

I don't want to imply that all speech is informal. At least *some* speech, even in our culture, is more formal than some writing. (See the Introduction to Part One for statistical evidence from linguists on this point.) Humans seem to like the sound and the feel of elegant language in their mouths and ears. Wallace Chafe works with a various Native American languages and writes about the tradition of ceremonial and ritual speech in different cultures (see Chafe

“Differences Between Colloquial and Ritual”). Consider this example of formal Indian oratory--from a speech made by the Delawares to the Mohicans in 1804, and printed in an old missionary magazine (see *Panoplist*):

When I look upon you I see your head is hanging down, and your tears running down and your heart upset; therefore remembering the custom of our forefathers, I stretch my hand, and wipe your eyes, that you may see your grandfather [the Delawares] clearly, and unstop your ears, that you may hear, and set your tongue and heart right that you may understand right, and make your bed good, that you may rest yourself. I sweep clean the path before your face." [Six strings of wampum were then delivered to the Mohicans. Thanks to Lion Miles for this example, personal email. Source?]

Even if the nineteenth century translator heightened the language, there can be little doubt that speakers and listeners were valuing something well shaped.

In short, writing has no monopoly on formality. We can find it in some speech--and reading aloud is a doorway that can take us there.

Specific Problems that Reading Aloud Can Cure

Here some representative stylistic problems that are usually improved by careful reading aloud:

- Roundabout or long winded language. Here's a good sentence for training. The tongue will naturally look for ways to break it down and "spit it out." *The overall plan of this study was to test whether sentence-combining practice that was in no way dependent on the students' formal knowledge of transformational grammar would increase the normal rate of growth of syntactic maturity in the students' freewriting in an experiment at the seventh grade level over a period of eight months.* (This was written by a scholar arguing for sentence-combining. What does it say about his ear for language?)

- Bureaucratic prose. Here is a "learning outcome" that a university adopted as a goal for all students: *Students enter, participate in, and exit a community in ways that do not reinforce systemic injustice.* When I asked a class there to work on this with their tongues and mouths, Dana Arvig (a college sophomore) came up with this: *Students participate in a community without reinforcing systemic injustice*

- Clang. Repetition. In writing (and especially in revising when we work at the micro level and lose perspective), we can easily fall into using the same word or phrase too often. Handbooks commonly advise writers to "vary the wording, avoid repetition." This explains why writers so often turn to a thesaurus. And the ear is good at hearing the annoying clang of repetition. Yet the ear can also recognize when repetition is effective. It can feel natural and give punch. Here's a passage I wrote: *Reading aloud makes us hear words. It intensifies our own experience of our own words. My mouth and ear don't quite like the repetition of words, but the repetition of own, while noticeable, sounds to me a source of strength.*

It turns out that Tolstoy used many features of spoken language in his writing. In particular he sensed the power of repetition. Most translators *removed* the repetition, but there's a recent translation (by Pevear and Volokhonsky) that gives us a better sense of how Tolstoy wanted to sound. Orlando Figes praises this version and points to the way previous translators had run away from this strong feature "in the interests of 'good writing'" (6).

In the scene before Prince Andre's coffin . . . where Tolstoy uses the past tense of the verb "to weep" (*plakat'*) no less than seven times, Pevear and Volokhonsky are the only translators not to flinch from using "wept" throughout: Garnett says "cried" four times and "wept" three; Louise an Aylmer Maude say both words three times each, omitting one verb altogether; Edmonds has "wept" four times and "cried" thrice; while Anthony Briggs says "wept" five times, omits one verb, and then breaks the repetition with "gave way to tears." (Figes 6)

Forceful writing doesn't fear repetition and a truly good writer judges not by abstract guidelines but by what works for mouth and ear. (Of course mouths and ears differ in different cultures. I've been told that lots of repetition is taken for granted in Japanese writing.)

- Interruptions that impede understanding and the natural flow of syntax. For example:

But a close reading of these scholars, especially Goody (1968) and Goody and Watt (1963), leaves some room for questioning the picture we just saw of consistent and universal processes or products--individual or societal--of literacy. Goody pointed out that in any traditional society, factors such as secrecy, religious ideology, limited social mobility, lack of access to writing materials and alphabetic scripts could lead to restricted literacy. . .

What struck my tongue and ear were the ungainly and confusing interruptions. But we can delay them till the tongue finds a natural pause. Here's what the mouth and ear yielded:

But if we read these scholars closely (especially Goody [1968] and Goody and Watt [1963]), we'll have some questions about the picture we just saw. We'll question whether the processes or products of literacy were universal to whole societies or just to individuals. Goody pointed out many factors that might serve to restrict literacy in traditional societies--factors like secrecy, religious ideology, limited social mobility, lack of access to writing materials and alphabetic scripts.

Sometimes it's mere thoughtlessness that lets us put an interruption wherever it first occurs to us. Or sometimes our sense *logic* makes us insert qualifications or parentheses right "where they belong"--right next to what they pertain to. But the tongue and ear know better: our mouths need to finish chewing the syntactic bite before taking on another bite--even if it is small. Here's an example--perhaps too fussy. I wrote,

There's that important word *give* again.

Engaging my tongue and ear, I felt a small unwanted interruption that sapped energy. It seemed stronger if I delayed the interruption:

There's that important word again, *give*.

Interruptions are especially troublesome in academic writing, yet the mouth knows how to prevent them from doing too much harm. Here's another example:

NAEP reported that students who read the most fluently (rated 4 on a 4-point scale) scored much higher on standardized tests of reading proficiency than students who read less fluently (rated 1 on a 4-point scale).

When this revised to be sayable, we get:

NAEP reported that students who read fluently scored much higher than less fluent readers on standardized tests of reading proficiency. On a 4-point scale, fluent readers scored 4 while less fluent ones scored only 1.

It's not that interruption is necessarily bad; it's a question of when an interruption gets in the way and when it does no harm--or even adds grace or elegance or interesting rhythm. The tongue and ear know the difference. Obviously tastes will differ; we get to decide how we want readers to perform our language. But it's a decision based on performance, not on theory. Many writers and copy editors want fewer interruptions than David Hume used in the eighteenth century. Consider this example of his prose:

It is sufficient for our present purpose, if it be allowed, what sure, without the greatest absurdity, cannot be disputed, that there is some benevolence, however small, infused into our bosom; some spark of friendship for human kind; some particle of the dove, kneaded into our frame, along with the elements of the wolf and the serpent. Let these generous sentiments be supposed ever so weak; let them be insufficient to move even a hand or finger of our body; they must still direct the determinations of our mind, and where everything else is equal, produce a cool preference of what is useful and serviceable to mankind, above what is pernicious and dangerous. (Quoted in Denby 96).

Yet who could deny the elegance of these syntactic interruptions and how they fit the music of intonational phrasing. He probably revised by reading it aloud, since that was such a celebrated practice in his era. Even when Henry James is more interruptive than I can easily handle, there's usually an intonational architecture rather than the randomness we see in so much scholarly writing.

Comparing What We Learn from the Mouth and Ear with Advice from Respected Authorities on Style

The most respected guide book on style is probably Joseph Williams' *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*. It's gone through many editions and is chock full of excellent advice and interesting examples. But I'd argue that the mouth and ear will give us *most* of what he offers, and we can get it without the grammatical knowledge that he asks for.

Here is Williams on nominalizations. He advises us to change *Our intention is to audit the records of the program* into *We intend to audit the records of the program*. Here's the principle he is drawing on--and it's his advice to writers:

When the nominalization is the subject of an empty verb, change the nominalization to a verb and find a new subject. (16)

I fear that not many students or others will find it useful to get advice in such a grammaticalized form. Yet the mouth and ear can usually get rid of the nominalization problem: the muffling of meaning inside abstract nouns and the blunting of energy.

We also get good advice from Richard Lanham's various excellent books on style. *Revising Prose* is the most practical. But revising by mouth and ear is much simpler and more pleasing than following his conceptual advice--which he summarizes repeatedly as follows:

1. Circle the prepositions.
2. Circle the "is" forms.
3. Ask, "Who is kicking who?"
4. Put this "kicking" action in a simple (not compound) active verb.
5. Start fast -- no mindless introductions.
6. Write out the sentence on a blank sheet of paper and look at its shape
7. Read the sentence aloud with emphasis and feeling.

We get mostly good advice from Williams and Lanham and they know far more about grammar and style than I do. But I prefer the test of mouth and ear not only because it's so much easier to use, but in many cases, I think it's more trustworthy. Williams and Lanham rely on

theoretical principles of grammar--and principles cut indiscriminately. Here are some cases where I see a problem in what they advise:

- When Williams follows his own advice about nominalizations, he says we should change *Our discussion concerned a tax cut* into *We discussed a tax cut*. But surely *Our discussion concerned a tax cut* is perfectly strong and clear and it would be just fine in various contexts. Plenty of nominalizations work well. The stylistic task is to get rid of those that impede understanding or deaden energy--and we can find those with our mouths and ears.

- Williams rules against the following sentence:

Scientists the world over, because they deliberately write in a style that is aloof, impersonal, and objective, have difficulty communicating with lay people ignorant of scientific method. (92)

He says to replace it with this one:

Because scientists the world over deliberately write in a style that is aloof, impersonal, and objective, they have difficulty communicating with lay people ignorant of scientific method. (92)

What he suggests is clean prose, but I prefer his “wrong” version. It has a better music of meaning.

- Williams lays down the general grammatical principle that we should not separate an adjective from the phrase that ought to follow it. Following this principle, he says we shouldn’t slip intervening words into the following holes: “as accurate . . . as any” and “more serious . . . than what.” Thus he advises the following improvements.

--Change “*The accountant has given as accurate* **a projection** *as any that could be provided*” into “*The accountant has given* **a projection** *as accurate as any that could have been provided.*”

--Similarly, he asks us to change “*We are facing a more serious* **decision** *than what you described earlier*” into “*We are facing* **a decision** *more serious than what you described earlier. (94).*”

His improvements are good austere prose, but why go to the trouble to rewrite when I’d say they are no better than his “wrong” versions.

What I sense in his “improvements” is the operation of a larger but hidden general principle (I wonder if he would acknowledge it): for good style, you must remove “the taint of speech.” I can’t find any errors or other problems in his “wrong” versions--except that they are more natural to the spoken language. He seems bothered if writing smacks of speech.

At this point one of my readers told me I was just quibbling. *Why argue? These are all matters of taste or style--or as Williams frames it, “grace.”* But I do argue. If it’s all a matter of taste and not error, why are things so often framed as rules? Does the passage that follows look like an invitation to develop or improve taste?

1. **Diagnose.** To predict how a reader will judge your writing, do this:

- Ignoring short (four- or five-word) introductory phrases, underline the first seven or eight words in each sentence. [Note how he should have delayed the parenthesis.]
- Look for two things:
 - Those underline words include abstract nouns.
 - You have to read at least six or seven words before you get to a verb.

2. **Analyze.** If you find such sentences, do this:

- Decide who your cast of characters is, particularly flesh-and-blood characters.
- Find the actions that those characters perform.

3. **Revise.**

- If the actions are nominalizations, change them into verbs.

- b. Make the characters the subjects of verbs.
- c. Rewrite the sentence with conjunctions like *because, if, when, although, why, how, whether, or that*. (Williams 41)

How can such a passage not reinforce the common feeling that writing is all a matter of following rules?

If we want to help people develop taste and grace, surely it's better to ask people to practice using their mouths and ears and help them learn to become gradually sensitive and skilled. This would be a way of helping them develop and improve their *own* style and taste--instead of following mechanical principles, algorithms, or systems in order to mimic someone else's notion of style.

He and Lanham acknowledge once or twice that we should consult the ear, but most of their decisions are based on *grammatical principle*. Williams wants to highlight "grace"--prominent in the title of his book--but he seems to go more for what's merely clean and is sometimes unmusical or wooden. More often I prefer Lanham's advice. His own voice and style are more lively and human. Because of his lifelong work on rhetoric and study of the complex prose and poetry of the English Renaissance, he makes more use of the mouth and ear. He is more flexible and catholic in his thinking about language, and more sensitive to the limitations of blanket principles of style. One of his early and most interesting books has a title that says a lot about his approach: *Against Style*.

In the next chapter I'll ask the interesting questions of *how* and *why* reading aloud improves written language.